

# ARTS IN REVIEW

ART REVIEW

## Connected Cultures

A show presents rare artifacts from an unstable period in China's history

By MICHAEL J. HATCH

New York

In the centuries following the Han dynasty's collapse in 220, China's territories divided into varied arrangements of frequently short-lived smaller states. In the north, periods of rule by non-Chinese peoples with connections to central and northeast Asia reconfigured the cultural landscape of what was once Han China. "Gold From Dragon City: Masterpieces of Three Yan From Liaoning, 337-436," at the China Institute Gallery, presents materials from three of these successive northern states, the Former Yan (337-370), Later Yan (383-407) and Northern Yan (407-436)—the "Three Yan" of the show's title—whose founders were from the Murong clan of the Xianbei, a multiethnic confederacy with nomadic roots.

Co-organized with the Liaoning Provincial Museum, which first staged it in 2021, the show gathers materials excavated from the 1950s to the 2000s in the area around what is now Chaoyang, Liaoning Province, and which was called Longcheng, or "dragon city," during the Yan period. You will not see a similar collection anywhere outside of a Chinese museum—not just because these objects come from state-sponsored digs, but also because early Chinese materials in major U.S. collections were bought before much interest in China's foreign-ruled states existed. This exhibition offers a rare chance to see diverse artifacts from an unstable period in China's history, and to trade a vision of its culture as monolithic for a subtler understanding of the shifting and interrelated heritages of its past.

The first gallery presents the fluid mixture of Silk Road objects, Han Chinese arts from the south, and northeast Asian influences that made up Yan material culture. A Roman aquamarine glass bowl and deep teal glass cup from the tomb of Feng Sufu (d. 415) glitter alongside an earthenware temple roof tile with a lotus motif and a modest, mold-made clay statuette of Buddha. Gold and gilt-bronze official seals topped with turtles, their carapaces etched with con-



Hat ornament from the Former Yan, left; seal of the Duke of Fanyang from the Northern Yan, above.

stellations, also found with Feng, reveal his titles as the "Duke of Liaoxi" and "Duke of Fanyang" in roughly cast Chinese script. An impressive limestone ink-grinding table, complete with a groove to hold a brush, likewise emphasizes his literacy in written Chinese, and the cast-bronze ritual objects buried with him bear restrained geometric ornament and zoomorphic features nearly identical to typical Chinese tomb goods of the Later Han dynasty.

Many of the Yan burial objects signal northern affiliations as well. The closest cousins to a tall, deep, bronze cauldron atop a perforated ring foot from the Former Yan dynasty are Korean stoneware

vessels of the same period. The long neck, gaunt profile, and waffer-thin antlers of the deer head that caps a large bronze belt ornament from a Former Yan tomb distinguish it from southern Chinese bronzes stylistically but also technically, through use of bolted fixtures rather than seamlessly cast designs.

Two galleries highlighting gold jewelry and equestrian technology provide the show's most compelling moments, helping us to fully discern the features of Yan arts. A single spotlighted gold headdress followed by a vitrine with four similar examples confronts viewers in the gold gallery, creating for a moment the sense of sitting in

attendance at the Yan court. Thin gold branches sprout from these ornamental crowns in organic undulations, and are hung with shimmering, mobile gold leaves that catch the light at broken angles. Called "step-and-sway" headdresses, these delicate crests are easy to imagine in motion as they turned their owners into scintillating spectacles.

The organic gold ornaments of this gallery further connect the Yan states to their northern and non-Chinese neighbors. The most conspicuous relatives of step-and-sway headdresses come either from first-century tombs in Afghanistan or from Korean tombs of about the same time as Yan rule. Nearby, among the other gold jewelry exhibited, a square gold belt plaque with a procession of three deer, their antlers intertwined, is displayed near the kind of clay mold used by goldsmiths to craft such designs. These link Yan culture to numerous examples of gold zoomorphic animal ornaments from the tombs of earlier nomadic peoples of the Eurasian Steppe.

In the gallery devoted to weapons and cavalry materials, the fluttering gold leaves of crowns meant for court are reborn in the gilt-bronze chanfron of horse armor, while the intertwined animal motifs of the belt plaque find their way into saddle decoration, indicating the continuity of Yan style across mediums. The earliest datable set of stirrups in world history, also from the tomb of Feng Sufu, are on display here too. Though these gilt wood examples were likely for formal processions, according to the exhibition, Yan stirrups revolutionized warfare by allowing cavalrymen to ride with heavier armor. The show ends here, on the three Yans' contribution to broader historical developments.

The exhibition's curation often reflects its origins, and at times viewers might feel as if they are walking through one of China's provincial museums. A gallery devoted to hand-painted facsimiles of murals from three separate tombs only demonstrates the skillful painting of the reproduction artists. A clumsy introductory video spends as much time describing dinosaurs and dragons as it does Yan materials. Throughout, a strong incorporative narrative emphasizes the contributions of the Xianbei people to Chinese culture at large.

Despite the eventual assimilation of the Xianbei, the real opportunity these artifacts offer is to witness the overlapping cultures of the Yan courts, and their implication that rulership in the northeast required as much investment in non-Chinese traditions as in Chinese ones.

**Gold From Dragon City: Masterpieces of Three Yan From Liaoning, 337-436**  
China Institute Gallery, through Jan. 5, 2025

Mr. Hatch teaches art history at Trinity College.

ARTS CALENDAR

### HAPPENINGS FOR THE WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 24

By WSJ ARTS IN REVIEW STAFF

Film

**"Megalopolis"** (Sept. 27)  
The much-anticipated film from Francis Ford Coppola takes place in a future America and follows the conflict between an idealistic architect and a corrupt mayor as the former tries to rebuild a city after a disaster. Drawing from the Catilinarian conspiracy of ancient Rome, the work features a cast of mythic proportions: Adam Driver, Giancarlo Esposito, Nathalie Emmanuel, Aubrey Plaza, Shia LaBeouf, Jon Voight, Laurence Fishburne, Talia Shire, Jason Schwartzman and Dustin Hoffman are just a few of the names in this sci-fi epic.

stranger than wrestling's scripted scenarios.

Theater

**"The Hills of California"** (Broadhurst Theatre, New York, Sept. 29-Dec. 8)  
Playwright Jez Butterworth ("The Ferryman") and director Sam Mendes team once again for a Broadway show, this one a time-skipping story of a trio of sisters in dire straits, united in 1970s Blackpool, England, by their dying mother and in the 1950s by chasing their dreams of something bigger.

Music

**Ezra Collective, "Dance, No One's Watching"** (Sept. 27)  
The London jazz quintet follows up its Mercury Prize-

The first major museum exhibition to survey the life, work and legacy of the singular dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey, this show collects work from more than 80 artists along with archival material including performance footage, interviews, notebooks, choreographic notes and performance programs.

Art

**"Electric Op"** (Buffalo AKG Art Museum, New York, Sept. 27-Jan. 27, 2025)  
The eye-popping history of Op Art takes center stage in this show of roughly 100 works, the first to examine how the movement related to industrial machinery as well as the dawning electronic media of the postindustrial era.

**"Spirit & Strength: Modern Art From Haiti"** (National Gallery of Art, Washington, Sept. 29-March 9, 2025)  
This exhibition highlights the often overlooked history of 20th-century Haitian art through its display of 21 objects recently gifted to the museum. They include works by Hector Hyppolite, Rigaud Benoit, Philomé Obin, Lois Mailou Jones and Eldzier Cortor that explore the nation's complicated, often turbulent past.

**Last Call "Jenny Holzer: Light Line"** (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, through Sept. 29)  
The Guggenheim puts a period on its historic survey of the text-based artist. Our critic described the centerpiece of the show as "a glowing LED ticker that circles the museum's iconic ramp while displaying phrases drawn from creations spanning the septuagenarian's career."

**Opera "What Belongs to You"** (Modlin Center for the Arts, University of Richmond, Virginia, Sept. 26-28)  
Garth Greenwell's debut novel receives an operatic adaptation in this world premiere from David T. Little, directed by Mark Morris and starring Karim Sulayman, with orchestrations performed by Alarm Will Sound.

winning record, "Where I'm Meant to Be," with a 19-track LP rooted in the power and possibilities of dance.

**Exhibitions "Edges of Ailey"** (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Sept. 25-Feb. 9, 2025)

For additional Arts Calendar listings visit [wsj.com](http://wsj.com). Write to [brian.kelly@wsj.com](mailto:brian.kelly@wsj.com).

The WSJ Daily Crossword | Edited by Mike Shenk

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- 22 Your, of yore
- 26 Bear in the night sky
- 28 Trophy
- 30 Son of Will Smith
- 31 Bravura
- 32 Elevator entertainment
- 33 "Is everything okay between us?"
- 34 San Bernardino suburb whose name means "pretty hill"
- 35 British territory at Iberia's southern tip
- 40 Convection cooker
- 41 Crate component
- 44 Pants problem
- 48 Credit card enticement
- 49 "Gosh!"
- 50 Soyuz rocket letters
- 54 Sarcastic retort to a complaint
- 55 Praline bit
- 56 On one's guard
- 58 Docile
- 60 Start for space or dynamic
- 62 Mob free-for-all
- 64 Course objective
- 66 Genesis name

A MATTER OF RECORD | By Gary Larson

<b>Across</b>	30 "Atlantic City" (Bruce Springsteen)	54 Vacation location	5 Kwik-E-Mart clerk on "The Simpsons"
1 Plays a part	33 Pond organism	57 Having a valuable coat	6 Attacks with a rapier
5 Brewpub order	36 Run-scoring out, for short	59 Cause for quaking	7 Rapier's kin
8 Company whose repairman did nothing for decades	37 Sign of life	61 Barbaric	8 Winery founder Paul
14 Convention group	38 Rage inducer, slangily	63 Like some old audiobooks	9 "Shark Tank" network
15 Little Lab	39 Country album?	65 "Jeepers Creepers" (Louis Armstrong)	10 Cosmonaut Gagarin
16 Grandfather, in Granada	42 Cowboys running back Elliott	67 Whoopi's "Ghost" role	11 Holders of services
17 "Little Deuce Coupe" (The Beach Boys)	43 Glowing coal	68 Gun	12 Type of winter sports team
19 Tough situation	45 Feel awful	69 Epps of "House"	13 Reduces one's carbon footprint, say
20 Handle	46 "Q ___ queen"	70 Intrepid people	18 Went like lightning
21 Understands	47 "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" (Michael Bublé)	71 Smelter's need	66 Genesis name
23 Reply to "That so?"	51 That lady, in Lisbon	<b>Down</b>	
24 End for baron or count	52 "The Masque of the Red Death" writer	1 Demean	
25 Street, in Strasbourg	53 Org. that combats false advertising	2 What are you looking at?	
27 Ad ___		3 Carries	
29 Director Lee		4 Aberdeen native	

Previous Puzzle's Solution

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ILLUSTRATION BY [unreadable]